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Intelligence work and bureaucracy

In Europe the favorite way to catch rabbits is to put nets over all rabbit holes then loose a ferret in the warren. As this fierce little creature rustles around underground, the bunnies come popping out into captivity.

Now it seems Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner wants to unleash a ferret into the labyrinth sometimes generously described as "the intelligence community," and put all the emerging rabbits in one sack — that is, completely centralize all the intelligence activities of the U.S. government under one boss.

This proposal — which has great appeal to public administration experts and other lovers of symmetry — has been around for years. On its face, it makes a lot of sense. Why, for example, should the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) be under the jurisdiction of the secretary of defense? Why should the State Department have a Bureau of Intelligence and Research?

Why, in short, can't anyone with the appropriate security clearance simply dial 242 (CIA) and get the straight facts?

There are two reasons why this alleged reform has been blocked: one political, one intellectual.

As usual the big battalions have been politicians who have rallied to defend the turf of their friends in State or Defense. Predictably, they will greet Adm.

Turner's notion with a parade of horrors which, against the vivid canvas of Watergate, ends up with a police state.

This doesn't keep me awake nights: After watching CBS's two-hour indictment of the CIA's efforts to get Castro, I confess that my reaction to the Rev. Bill Moyers's sermonizing was a yawn.

If this brilliantly trained "secret army" couldn't mount a third-rate burglary, how could you expect them to do Castro any damage? As I have noted before, my reaction to many CIA activities has been to send for a grand jury, not a confessor.

No, the problem with intelligence organization is not the potential for a police state once a centralized structure is created. The difficulty lies in the very nature of bureaucracy, which curiously in our time has become a "right-wing" issue.

A century or more ago, both here and in Europe, the centralist "liberals" (who were in fact conservatives) were the big supporters of government by "experts."

In contrast, the social democrats fought the bureaucratic compulsions of a Bismarck, and British socialists opposed the cold ruthlessness of the Liberal party's Benthamites.

Indeed, without getting academic, the first major critiques of bureaucratic power came from the left,

anticipating by half a century Milovan Djilas's description of a bureaucratic party as a "new class."

We were spared this in the United States by that joyous custom, the "spoils system." When the Democrats came in, they cleaned out Republican officeholders, and vice versa. While it had its disadvantages, particularly in technical areas, it certainly forestalled government by bureaucracy.

But, as an appalled professional Foreign Service is learning, the President now has only 2,200 jobs at his disposal, among the best being embassies. What do you do with a rich friend who couldn't run a peanut shucker? Obviously, make him ambassador to Ruritania.

It is against this background of entrenched bureaucratic power that the proposed centralization of the "intelligence community" must be considered.

Since the bureaucrats are firmly in place, the one way a political leader can get some elbow room is to set bureaucracies fighting among themselves. If the CIA comes in with a monopoly assessment of some crisis, you're stuck. How do you know in the Oval Office what differing estimates got killed two layers down in the pickle factory?

If you are lucky, one of your presidential aides may live next door to an intelligence officer whose radically different reading of a

situation thus comes in over the transom in a plain brown envelope. (Here I speak with experience — I was the plain brown envelope specialist in LBJ's White House; that is, his spy on "his" bureaucracy.) But that's not a recommended way to run a government.

Given the fact the President is trapped in a quicksand of GS-18s, the last thing he should do is put them all in one swamp. On the contrary, he should have at least three competing sources of information with direct access to all relevant data, who report to him through independent channels.

Sloppy? Yes. Inefficient? In terms of labor costs, probably. Sound? Absolutely.

The only President in the country can't allow himself to be mousetrapped by "experts," no matter how dedicated and sincere they may be. Nobody ever elected a GS-18.